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The practicing writer encounters four determinants of his use of prose. First, the language itself determines the expression: English, with its wealth of words and styles and with few traditional restrictions, provides problems of choice and temptations to overwrite. Second, the application of verse forms to the novel and a demand for consistently arresting language patterns encourage writers to strive for extravagant effects. A third determinant is the attitude of the writer toward his characters and what he is expressing. This "tone of mind" may vary from the simplicity expressed in Hemingway's sentences to the complexity in Patrick White's varied syntax. Fourth, a writer's use of language is determined by the range of styles he has available for adaption: frequently style is influenced by the writer's concurrent reading, and the second draft of the novel must assimilate a multitude of styles. Ideally, the language should arise from the vitality of the novel. A style can be noticeable but it should remain a medium for expression, not an end in itself. Australian novelists face peculiar problems in their lack of a literary community, their colonial self-consciousness, and the difficulty of symbolically using the Australian landscape. (LH)

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A Novelist Looks at Prose Writing

By Australian writer, Tom Keneally.

At this stage, it seems that the best way of contributing to your conference is to deal with prose strictly from the practising writer's point of view, to describe the conflict — and conflict it is — not from the level of staff headquarters but from the level of an n.c.o. in the field. On such a level there is always confusion and prejudice; this paper is, in a sense, a picture of confusion, in so far as it traces some of the influences that make it difficult for the novelist, the novice novelist in particular, to decide at precisely which plane he should pitch his prose. It says something to, about extremes of which the writer will be aware, the extremely mannered and figurative possibilities of language on the one hand, and the extremely functional and direct possibilities on the other.

As for prejudices . . . ? This paper will begin from a prejudice, namely that the novel is a hearty brute and impetuous, an exercise in vitality first and in ideas and form only second. Lionel Trilling speaks of "the headlong, profuse, often careless quality of the novel". A. A. Phillips said once that most great novels are "divine messes"; not so much that they gain from being messes, if indeed they are, but that the novel involves an innate conflict between vigour and construction. Virginia Woolf says something of this conflict in an essay called "Granite and Rainbow":

"It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction to put us at a distance from the special life and obliterate its features: while it is the gift of the novel to bring us into close touch with life. The two powers fight if they are brought into combination. The most complete novelist must be the novelist who can balance the two powers so that the one enhances the other."

Arising from the presupposition that the novel is a hearty brute is a definite view of what the prose of the novel should be. To call again on Lionel Trilling: "Mr. Eliot praises the prose of **Nightwood** for having so much affinity with poetry. This is not a virtue, and I believe that it will not be mistaken for a virtue by any novel of the near future which will interest us. The loss of a natural prose, one which has at least a seeming affinity with good common speech, has often been noted. It seems to me that the observation of the loss has been too complacently made and that its explanations, while ingenious, have had the intention of preventing it from being repaired in kind. A prose which approaches poetry has no doubt its own value, but it cannot serve to repair the loss of a straightforward prose, rapid, masculine, and committed to events, making its effects not by the single word or by the phrase but by words properly and naturally massed. I conceive that the creation of such a prose should be one of the conscious intentions of any novelist."

There are many influences militating against **a natural prose, straightforward, masculine and committed to events, making its effects by words properly and naturally massed.** These influences militate particularly in the case of the young, that is, unskilled novelist, whose reading is eclectic, that is, confusing, whose confidence in the validity of what he writes may be small. Effects based on the word and on the phrase may become for him the most self-conscious problem often the problem closest to the centre of his aspirations. It may seem extreme to claim that effects based on the word and the phrase are often the writer's most self-conscious problem. However, even for people who plan their writing in detail, there is a great deal of

the intuitive in their handling of character — as Elizabeth Bowen says in some excellent **Notes on Writing a Novel,** it is always as if the character pre-existed the particular novel, and the novelist did not so much create him as discover or recognize him. So that the very articulate pronouncements which an author might make about his methods of characterization in a book he has written, are often the result of hindsight, and are sometimes merely what people who know something about literature have told him about his own book. Therefore, for the writer in the 1960's, characterization would not often involve the same kind of deliberate striving as is involved in language use.

Before we see some of the causes of the novelist's extremely self-conscious attitude to language, it may help if examples were given of prose which, in all good conscience, does not seem to be natural and unobtrusive. Both passages are written by people of spacious talents and are offered on the grounds that if language provides its hazards for them, then how much more does it for the ruck of us.

Firstly, Thea Astley in **The Slow Natives:**

"Insomniac Sister Mary Mary Matthew, derobing in the winter chill of her cell, shook about like fine sand and piled-up hour-glass frettings of the last year into a powder at the bottom of midnight's black glass, and, slippered for safety, glided down the stairs through the re-set, gleam-thick refectory to the bare moon-lapped grounds.

"Taut as madness, fine as frenzy, she found her way to the practice-rooms behind the hedges and there, in the blazing exposure of the bare light-bulb, played angrily, worried the keys and the same theme with her mad uncontrolled dissonances, an emotional **rubato** that shocked, shocked."

This makes pleasant reading and is impressive writing, yet both sentences seem to be a mite overcrowded. They are characterized by devices which seem poetic: the four compound adjectives in the first sentence; the terse combination of a word of concrete affiliations with an abstract noun — 'slippered for safety", "taut as madness", "fine as frenzy"; the distractingly poetic nature of the image about the "piled-up hour glass frettings of the last year . . . at the bottom of midnight's black glass"; and so on. It is this preoccupation with images, arresting syntax, and overstocking of sentences that begins to close in on the reader by the end of what is, in any case, a very fine novel.

Secondly, Hal Porter.

Though he is a writer of immense prestige, and well above the range of our slings and arrows, it is hard to see how he can be freed of a charge of sometimes overcrowding his prose.

"From **Fox Inn, Rumbling Bridge, Black Snake Inn, The Grasshopper, The Brown Bear, Whaler's Return, The Man on the Wheel** and **Help me through the World,** from every gin-crib, rum-shack and grog-shop in Hobart Town gushed the bawlings and whinnyings, the obscenities vile to the point of innocence, the punctilious blasphemies, of tin-men and their gap-toothed doxies, of spit-curled ostlers and sweaty cocottes, of gin-crazed fan-makers and spewing chawbacons.

"From Nature, eternally at her lewd balance sheet, could have come nothing but a smirk of approval. From heaven came nothing but what its ears had tasted and rejected: the echoes of a glory of ribaldry.

"Already, night not yet down, the reeking necessaries over-flowed, the fingers of bug-hunters were at the fobs of the dead-drunk, the hand of the

randy sawyer fumbled the bonnet-maker's gape, the gristle of the cooper gardened in the long eye of the backyard slut.

"To the wailing cat-gut of the elbow-jiggers and the screams of doll-commons, at some arbitrary hour, Christ would be imagined infant again, and bells would ring bats and starlings from their towers into the mosquito-spiced and earsplitting night."

Once more, the inevitable generation of a feeling of word-flatulence by the close of the book.

So these are examples of prose which seems to fail by a fairly common Australian malaise of excess. There are reasons for this brand of failure: this paper attempts to discern four.

The first determinant of the use of prose by novelists is clearly the language itself — abominably rich in word and syntax, with fewer traditional restrictions on its use than occur in other great languages. The richness of the lode provides its own problems, is its own temptation.

There are languages, Russian for example, in which the range of words and synonyms which prevails in English is simply not available. There are languages, Danish for example, which restrict variation of style, so that the man who writes is not confused by alternatives, but has one choice, to write functional, workable Danish. Thirdly, there are literatures, French for example, which although backed by a prolific language, traditionally enforce greater formalism on the imaginative writer's use of prose.

The possibility, for the novelist writing in English, is that words and phrasing, images and tricks of construction may too easily distract him away from the fundamental business of the novel. He may be too satisfied with the secondary rewards of language; and rewards there are.

A review of my novel, **The Fear**, after justly pointing out a structural fault, which, if incorporated in the Harbour Bridge, would have caused the deaths of thousands of Sydney-siders, goes on to claim that all is not thereby lost, that style remains: "As for his style it is largely by this that he stands or falls for the individual reader."

Yet while it is possible to believe that a novel can fall by style, it can only stand by its style if considerations of language use are primary considerations. And it is questionable whether, in the novel, they are.

A second determinant: the influence of verse and the application of verse criteria to the novel; the application, in the first place, of poetic ideas of form as enunciated by T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards; and secondly the demand that language should consistently be used in new and arresting patterns. In the passages I have quoted, the dangers of this latter demand are seen in the knobbly nature of a prose too patently and continually striving.

A third determinant: a matter of temperament — it is difficult for a non-expert to find another word. By temperament, I mean the tone of mind in which a writer looks at his characters, the way in which he develops and exposes them, all of which will determine his use of language. Does he place people who are unsophisticated in an uncluttered setting, and have them figure forth the primal things of life with considerable starkness? An example of such a tone of mind is Hemingway, whose prose can afford to be correspondingly simple, avoiding the compound sentence, eschewing the elliptic and the tirelessly varied syntax of a Patrick White or Thea Astley.

This choice of prose style, imposed by temperament, is by its nature limiting — all style limits. An intimation of the limits of Hemingway's style may well be the frequent numbness it seems to impose on characters in scenes even of extreme movement. There is a scene in **A Farewell to Arms**, in which the hero, involved in the Italian retreat from Caporetto, tries to order two fleeing n.c.o.'s to help his men dig out a bogged vehicle.

"'Halt," I said. They kept on down the muddy road, the hedge on either side.

'I order you to halt,' I called. They went a little faster. I opened up my holster, took the pistol, aimed at the one who had talked the most, and fired. I missed and they both started to run. I shot three times and dropped one. The other went through the hedge and was out of sight. I fired at him through the hedge as he ran across the field. The pistol clicked empty and I put in another clip. I saw it was too far to shoot at the second sergeant. He was far across the field, running, his head held low. I commenced to reload the empty clip. Bonello came up.

'Let me finish him,' he said....

Bonello leaned over, put the pistol against the man's head and pulled the trigger. The pistol did not fire.

'You have to cock it,' I said.

He cocked it and fired twice...."

Patrick White's **Voss** is also a primal performance of a type, but all White's characters have a quality of assertiveness, the landscape is also assertive and, more or less, the peer of a central character who is flexing the muscles of his own suspected divinity. Too great a load of assertion for a fabric of simple weave to hold; Hemingway's style could not carry the anguished metaphysician who is Voss, who is Patrick White.

This truism about temperament gives rise to another truism, but a far less fully realized one: that style is not an external coating, it should arise as markedly from the novelist's vision as does the treatment of character -- it is the epidermis, it is not the tunic. Robert Liddell, incidentally, in **Treatise on the Novel** says that the prejudice for over-rich writing lies in the vicious distinction between "style" and "subject-matter", a distinction which he says originates, for the individual reader, in the classroom.

At another extreme from Hemingway is Dylan Thomas. Historically, he is a poet, yes, credited with a mid-century resuscitation of verse. But a small acquaintance with manuscripts by young authors inclines me to believe that his prose has a wide influence on them.* It does often seem that much of his prose is poetry which has merely forgone the seeming arbitrariness of free verse form. But this is not the only reason why his prose tends to an extreme. He reveals character continuously through the tiny and domestic — in **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog**, for example. The reader is less aware of the author's constant choice of significant or massive incidents and obtains the impression that all incident is significant and revealing for Dylan Thomas. Nor does this account for Thomas's prose being precisely as it is; but if you write in such a way that the tiniest movement of a character is forced to yield significance, then you are forced to a more complex style. This, though so obvious, is the basis of one of the major problems in writing a novel.

Let us use, to introduce the problem, the highly-talented Australian novelist who complained that it took him a week to move one of his female characters out of a room. The novelists are legion who feel that they cannot allow themselves the decent simplicity of a sentence such as "X rose

and left the room". If a writer is committed to having his characters do most things in a way utterly characteristic; if on most occasions when a given character, for purposes of advancing the plot, has to answer the phone, lift a cup, open a door, his action is individually and distinctively revealed, is graced with a metaphor or covered by an adjectival clause which tabs him, then by chapter three or four a writer feels unable to have recourse to the simple, the functional, the sentence which is there merely to move the character from one scene of activity to another. And to such a writer, the blend of the functional and the elegant which Evelyn Waugh achieves can seem very enviable.

The demand that writing be continually distinctive involves a danger to the rule of relevance in the novel. This is a rule that cannot be strictly applied without imperilling the colour of the book. Yet a writer, having exhausted the capacity of the relevant elements of his material for quaint treatment, feels too often forced to add colour by means of the irrelevant. Admirers of Jane Austen often press her example on the writer who tries too hard. When we remember that "dear Jane" lived during a golden age of British architecture and landscaping, when we recall that the parlour of Emma Woodhouse's home at Hartfield would provoke any other writer to a purple passage, and that the journey to Box Hill at the end of the book would have passed sufficient Palladian facades to cause a bout of compulsive image-coining in novelists less sensible than Miss Austen, then the advice does not seem entirely misplaced.

The young novelist can often feel himself bound to show off with images as extensively as does the young poet. He should not, however, consider that he must send the aforesaid woman out of the room on the spine of a figure of speech. But there is a prejudice abroad against showing the bare bones of movement in the novel. So the novelist will fret over imagery and ploys of language. The sicknesses which attend extremely self-conscious writing will attend what he writes — unevenness, the breaking of the prose harmonies, the echoes and more than echoes of plagiarisms, the overall ill-assorted air.

What the novelist complained of then, with his lady stuck at the point of departure, may seem an unreal problem to a man who writes an honest and far from graceless prose for, say, a scholarly journal, and who admires good, sober prose that does not lack pungency. He will tend to tell the novelist, "use the same principles that Evelyn Waugh uses." It is the right advice; yet giving it to the word-struck writer is the equivalent of telling the neurotic to relax and the alcoholic to control himself.

The fourth determinant of an individual writer's use of language is the range of styles available for adoption or adaptation. To write a novel slowly over a period of months and, at the same time, to read a random series of modern novels, is a dangerous experience. It is easy to be influenced by the writer you happen to be reading at a given time, and afterwards, it is sometimes possible to recognize different stages of your book in terms of the series of writers you read during your own work.

I can identify the following passage, from a book I wrote last year, as originating in a period during which I read a great deal of Hemingway. The resemblance will not be immediately obvious because the passage has been extensively revised; but it will be clear that it was written in a naturalistic vein where the second passage to be quoted derives from other influences altogether.

"Quinn is detained in a hut without windows. Hailstones have made a hole in its roof, and he can be seen while the moon fills his corner, as it will not do for many more minutes. There's a young fellow further down the hut, out of the light such as it is. He's there for making a ragged hole in a lady's head. He knows he made the ragged hole — didn't he do it with a palpable lump of quartz? His crime seems genuine to him. It does not seem like the crime of another person. He is sure he wielded the quartz, he is sure of the punishment. He has no imagination, except that he wishes he'd made a bigger hole."

The second passage was written after reading a number of modern poets, notably Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins.

"Easter rain came down like flint-arrows on the Tuesday of Holy Week, and people unaccustomed to its vehemence because of the dry weather, stood under eaves and grimaced at it. Suddenly, the clay- and saw-pits gurgled and filled with a stew. Some alien earth was in the stew, but it was almost possible to believe, standing above these places with idle tools in your hands, that each pit was coloured the peculiar colour of the pain of the men who had filled it summer-full of blisters, heartburn, gut-cramp, god-hate. Men blinded at the shipyards and brickfields by tropic gobs of water on their lashes, groped for gear, blinking the improbable colours of the prism out their eyeballs, until once more they could see an adze for an adze, which was the only safe way of seeing anything.

"Rev. Mr. Calverley, lucky under hardwood shingles this thatch-reaving weather, went to his desk and wrote down. 'The rain has come, and bounty has lit up again the weary land.' It was a suitable Easter theme. But towards dinner, he remembered the heartless way long rain dealt with churchyards, and went out with a lantern to see if his son's grave had sunk in the outline of a coffin, threatening the resurrection."

So styles disturb by the extremes they provide, and styles influence through being so distinctive. The range amongst contemporary novelists include styles of dated elegance like Martin Boyd's, styles of classical wit like Anthony Powell's, styles workhorse like most of C. P. Snow, styles evocative and poetic like Thomas's, styles sober like Iris Murdoch's, styles visionary like Patrick White's, styles figurative-streamlined like Graham Greene's, styles of modern and elegant pungency like Evelyn Waugh's, styles of self-conscious simplicity like much of Hemingway. Basically, there are styles which reassure the writer in his good habits and styles that are so individual that to imitate them is to commit an enormity on the novel.

A fundamental question is this: does the prose obtrude, does it come between the reader and the meat of the novel? Does it present itself as something to be relished for its own sake, or even to be surmounted, before one comes down to that honest tableland where the action of the novel takes place? Or does the prose fulfil Henri Bergson's famous dictum?

"The truth is that the writer's art consists above all in making us forget that he uses words. The harmony he seeks is a certain correspondence between the movements of his mind and the phrasing of his speech, a correspondence so perfect that the undulations of his thought, born of the sentence, stir us sympathetically; consequently the words, taken individually, no longer count... The rhythm of speech has, then, no other object than the rhythm of thought."

In practice, only a certain type of politician and some of his brothers who have escaped into other professions, can make us forget that he is using words. In the irony which is one of the novel's main graces, there is

the irony of the individual words as well as the irony of whole attitudes. We are meant to advert to the aptness and even to the colour of a sentence that gives an important insight because it contains an important image or a fresh use of language. This conflict between language as a mere vehicle and language as an instrument of joy is made explicit by taking two short lists of modern writers. In list A, we could put Joyce Cary, C. P. Snow, Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Amis; four people whose prose is unquestionably direct and masculine but also frequently sapless to a degree. In list B, let us have Patrick White and Randolph Stow, two writers who are accused of writing too poetic a prose, who are accused also of writing obtrusive prose. Yet Patrick White, in particular, arrests by the vibrancy of his however much obtrusive style and by the extent of the visions it sets up. This streak of mystical vision in Patrick White is, as we all know, an exceptional gift, and while we are actually experiencing his genuine insight we feel that perhaps the people mentioned in List A are as indefensibly dull as a county council.

The obvious but platitudinous answer seems to be that when the image and the originality of the language are both the result of the vitality of the author's vision, when they belong to the organism, when they are both noticeable yet still a medium, then you have the ideal. Then there is correspondence between rhythm of thought and rhythm of speech.

As well as these general problems of writing prose in the novel, there are special difficulties involved in writing in Australia. Firstly, there is no Australian literary community. Without entering into details, it suffices to say that a young Australian beginning to write, will blunder through a series of artificially adopted styles culled from the **Penguin Modern Classics.** The second difficulty is colonial self-consciousness, the desire to show that an Antipodean can turn as nice a phrase as anyone from north of the equator. We still have not lost our much talked-about and adumbrated-upon "cultural cringe". A third problem is involved in the symbolic use of Australian landscape. It was not until well into the present century that Australians began to write of Australia on its own terms, without self-consciousness. We have not yet exorcised or made our own the Australian setting. There is a galvanizing sentence in **Kangaroo** concerning the unhumanised look of this country. "It feels as if no one had ever loved it", says Mrs. Somers during a trip to the South Coast of New South Wales. "Do you know what I mean? England and Germany and Egypt and India—They've all been loved so passionately. But Australia feels as if it had never been loved, and never come out into the open. As if man had never loved it and made it a happy country, a bride country—or a mother country."

You can exorcise a landscape by tilling it, erecting an oil refinery or a gas works on it, but best of all, by using it creatively — by introducing it as an element in characterization; in the case of the novel, as a pressure on character, as a foil, as a parallel big world to the little world of man's soul.

To conclude, "The English novel," writes R. Liddell, "is still in need of a purge." It is, I think, possible to agree.

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[1] Thea Astley, **"The Slow Natives"**, Angus & Robertson, 1965.
[2] Hal Porter, **"The Tilted Cross"**, Faber & Faber, 1961.
[*] Professor Goldberg expressed surprise at the mention of this influence, and so I do not press the point, since my reading of manuscripts has been very limited.